

Lies and American History

AN INTERVIEW WITH JAMES W. LOEWEN



Monica Almeida/The New York Times/Redux

Bland, boring textbooks don't tell the truth about American history, nor do they prepare students adequately for their important work as citizens.

By Joan Richardson

KAPPAN: Let's start with some basics. Why should students study American history?

LOEWEN: American history is about who we are, how we got here. If it's taught correctly, then it should have relevance to the present. It should be taught with causation, what causes what.

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In order to learn what we should do with the issues of today — such as gays in the military or gay marriage — and the problems of next year that we can't even know about this year, we have to think about what has caused what in the past. Even if you're a chemistry teacher or a poetry teacher, you have to keep in the back of your mind: What are we teaching students that helps them do their jobs as Americans?

KAPPAN: You say in your newest book, *Teaching What Really Happened* (Teachers College Press, 2010: 13), that “history can and should also make us less ethnocentric.” Can you explain that?

LOEWEN: Teaching American history as it's usually taught makes us dramatically *more* ethnocentric. Actually, every nation teaches its history ethnocentrically. If you learned the national history in Sweden, they'd be emphasizing the great things about Sweden. But I'm suggesting that the United States is the most ethnocentric nation in the world, and for good reason. We are the only nation that can tell ourselves correctly that we're the dominant economy, the dominant culture, the dominant military.

We do not need to teach our students, our young people, how to be ethnocentric. They already come out ethnocentric enough. Ethnocentrism, among other things, is a form of ignorance. And it has an ugly Siamese twin called arrogance. That makes it really hard for us to learn from other cultures, to imagine that other cultures do anything better than we do. But other cultures do some things better than we do. Health care provides a sterling example of that.

KAPPAN: Your point is that if we study the broader truth of American history, then we have the potential of becoming less ethnocentric.

LOEWEN: Yes, American history — and, for that matter, world history — can be taught so as to challenge students to think and not just salute the flag. The way American history *is* taught, it's an onward and upward arrow. We started out great and we just got better and better. Textbooks suggest that we've always tried to do the right thing. And if we ever did the wrong thing, we did it with the best of intentions. Now, that just won't do. It won't do for some aspects of our foreign policy. It won't do for race relations. It's not an analytical or thoughtful way of looking at our past.

KAPPAN: Can we afford to tell the truth about “the totality of our acts,” as historian Paul Gagnon puts it, or do we jeopardize the pride that Americans have in their country if we do that? And does that matter?

LOEWEN: Do American adults really believe that

our American past has been so bad that we can't tell the truth about it? What do they think is going to happen? Are Americans going to emigrate because of our history? Is it going to undermine the country?

I don't think our history's been that bad. Certainly, it's been no worse than other countries.

We don't apply that thinking to other countries. We are delighted, for example, that Germany faces its Nazi past. We wouldn't have it any other way for them. Well, if it's appropriate for them, surely it's appropriate for us.

SANITIZING HISTORY

KAPPAN: Has there been a deliberate attempt to sanitize American history in textbooks, or has American history been watered down through sins of omission because of the breadth and depth of the task?

LOEWEN: In one sense, I think it is deliberate. Publishers and, for that matter, authors don't want to lose sales. Imagine if a history textbook told the truth about Franklin W. Pierce, my candidate for the second worst president of the United States. (Editor's Note: Loewen declined to identify his candidate for worst U.S. president.) Pierce was the only president who was elected by his party, served a full term, wanted to be renominated, and his party wouldn't renominate him. When he came home to New Hampshire after four years, nobody even met his train! He did even worse things after he was president, like siding with the Confederacy during the Civil War. Now, if a textbook just said what I said, it might lose sales in New Hampshire, or at least the publisher might envisage that that would happen.

As a result, the entire history of the nation ends up being bland. In a sense, that's deliberate. It's not deliberate in the sense that there's a conspiracy but because the push for sales inspires publishers to create bland, boring texts that won't offend anyone.

KAPPAN: You did your initial work reviewing history textbooks that led to *Lies My Teachers Told Me* during the mid-1990s. You reviewed about a half dozen of the same books around 2006 for the second edition of that book. Did the textbooks improve during those intervening years, or did you discover the same kinds of problems?

LOEWEN: They didn't improve much. There was one improvement. That was with regard to the treatment of Columbus. But I think that's because of events in 1992. Even though I was writing in 1995, that first batch of textbooks was written before 1992. Those textbooks were terrible with regard to Columbus.

In particular, they completely left out what has

come to be called the Columbian Exchange. They emphasize 1492 rather than 1493. The real importance of Columbus was what he did in 1493 and thereafter, not his first voyage. By Columbian Exchange, we mean the exchange of ideas, diseases, gold and silver, organisms like horses and pigs, corn and potatoes across the oceans. This is a process that Columbus really began in 1493 on his return trip and thereafter. It's the most important thing that has happened on the planet Earth in the last 1,000 years. Ultimately, it helped cause a population explosion in northern Europe and some depopulation in western Africa. It basically caused Christianity to "win" over Islam because of the profusion of gold and silver that came into the Christian nations from trade with the Americas. The repercussions are still going on, even in our ecosystem. It's just crucial to learn about this.

The books in the 1990s said nothing about that. The newer ones do.

Now, I don't claim that I caused this change. I think it was the "celebrations" of Columbus in 1992. President George H.W. Bush proposed widespread celebrations in 1992 and set up celebratory committees in each state. But it didn't work out the way it had in 1892.

Columbus was contested. Native American protesters threw paint on some Columbus statues, and Native American and non-Native American scholars as well pointed out some of the things that Columbus did that weren't so wonderful and that those acts were maybe more important than arriving in 1492.

As a result, there was quite a rethinking of Columbus. Gradually, within about eight years, this rethinking hit textbook authors. Other than that, the textbooks have not gotten better. In some ways, they've actually gotten worse. They're bland. They don't want to say anything harsh or anything real.

KAPPAN: When you look at the more recent history in textbooks, are they putting as much spin on those recent events as earlier eras or, because of the more aggressive news reporting and because it's closer to the events, do they tend to be more accurate?

LOEWEN: They're pretty up-to-date in terms of the events they include. They include 9/11, the war in Iraq, the Florida election in 2000. But I don't think they're much more accurate. They're still pretty nationalistic.

For example, why did we attack Iraq? There are several different possibilities. But none of the six textbooks that I read presented the war in Iraq as a question, and only one of them questioned the Administration's rationale for attacking Iraq. That's not an advance.



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AGE: 68

EDUCATION: Bachelor's degree in sociology, Carleton College, 1964. Ph.D. in sociology, Harvard University, 1968.

PROFESSIONAL HISTORY: Professor of sociology, University of Vermont, 1975-1997. Associate professor, Tougaloo College, Mississippi, 1968-1975. Fulbright Fellowship to Australia to teach law and race relations, 1981.

BOOKS: *Teaching What Really Happened* (Teachers College Press, 2010); *Sundown Towns* (The New Press, 2005); *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Markers and Monuments Get Wrong* (The New Press, 1999); *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your High School History Textbook Got Wrong* (The New Press, 1995); *The Truth About Columbus* (The New Press, 1992); co-author, *Mississippi: Conflict and Change* (Pantheon Books, 1974); and *The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White* (Harvard University Press, 1971).

AWARDS: Lillian Smith Award for Best Southern Nonfiction, *Mississippi: Conflict and Change* (co-authored with Charles Sallis), 1975. American Book Award (from the Before Columbus Foundation), *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your High School History Textbook Got Wrong*, 1996.

OTHER: *Mississippi: Conflict and Change* (Pantheon Books, 1974) won the Lillian Smith Award for Best Southern Nonfiction of 1975. But the state of Mississippi rejected the book for use in the public schools, which led Loewen to become the lead plaintiff in a lawsuit (*Loewen v. Turnipseed*) filed against the state in 1975. As a result of the court's finding, Mississippi was ordered to adopt the textbook for six years beginning in 1980 and during that time to make it available to all districts that wanted to use it.

WEB SITE: <http://sundown.afro.illinois.edu>.

KAPPAN: Is it possible that it's too soon to reflect accurately what happened?

LOEWEN: I don't think it's the passage of time one way or the other. It should be easier to get accurate history about the recent past because of the news reporting and because the various actors are still alive. I don't think that the passage of time automatically gives us more perspective.

Textbook authors feel there's less controversy writing about the causes of the War of 1812. So what you write about the War of 1812 is not going to be vetted quite as carefully as what you write about the recent past.

Teachers need to stop relying on the textbook and teach American history courses themselves.

My real conclusion is this: Textbook publishers are just putting out a bland product that they really don't care that much about. The putative authors don't care that much about them either. So, there's no real quality control. For this reason, teachers need to stop relying on the textbook and teach the course themselves.

KAPPAN: One of my big aha moments in reading your book was learning that the authors whose names are on the cover often aren't the people who have written the textbook, that the work is often handed off to writers who really aren't experts in the topic.

LOEWEN: I asked one textbook author, "Aside from the fact that you didn't write the book, what do you think about it as a work of history?" He said, "Well, just a minute, let me get it down from the shelf." He hadn't even read it!

READING LITERATURE

KAPPAN: In this issue of *Kappan*, we also have an article by Steven Wolk about what students should be reading in schools. One of Wolk's points is that history and science classes should incorporate more literature into the coursework instead of relying on textbooks. I wonder what you think about that, especially whether incorporating fiction into history classes enriches or jeopardizes a student's view of history.

LOEWEN: I agree with the basic premise that we should not be relying on the textbooks. These textbooks have grown; maybe the word metastasize is better than grown. When I did my first review of 12

textbooks in the mid-1990s, they averaged 888 pages. By 2006, when I did my second review — and I might add final review since I will never subject myself to reading those boring behemoths again — they averaged 1,152 pages.

Every high school or middle school history course needs to buy a 300-page paperback for the price of about one-sixth of the hardbound American history textbooks. For about \$12 a year, schools can actually buy a paperback for every student, and students can end up with their own book that they can write in and keep for the rest of their lives. If the textbook is only 300 pages, teachers will not only have the time to teach everything in the book, they'll also feel pressure to supplement the textbook, to have students read original sources, historic documents.

To the matter of fiction, there's only one novel that I recommend without reservation, and it's hardly known. That's *Okla Hannali* by R.A. Lafferty (Doubleday, 1972; University of Oklahoma Press, 1991). This is a remarkable book. It's a fun read, maybe not for every high school student but certainly for their teachers and for college students. It's the story of an imaginary Choctaw leader who lives from 1801 to 1899. It's a Choctaw history of the United States for the 19th century. It covers the removal of the Choctaws from Mississippi, the advent of Indian territory, the Civil War, and Reconstruction. I haven't discovered a single historical error in it.

That said, I think it's also excellent to teach from really bad novels. For example, you can assign students about 40% of *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell and get them thinking about what this book says about black people, slavery, and Reconstruction. But you should also assign a large part of the antidote, *Jubilee* by Margaret Walker. Then, students have two opposite points of view about the history of that era.

KAPPAN: So you're saying that literature may be a good way to stimulate curiosity and a way to encourage students to explore different views of historical events.

LOEWEN: Absolutely. Literature can be used. But it shouldn't be assigned as a single source of knowledge.

PRIMARY DOCUMENTS

KAPPAN: At what grade level are students able to deal with primary documents? Is that something that has to wait until high school?

LOEWEN: No, not at all. I know primary sources can be used by 5th graders because I've done it. For

example, you can show them photographs from the past and have them interpret what they see there.

Whenever students are working with primary sources, however, you have to keep in mind that those were written or created by someone who was an actor at the time. That's someone who had a point of view and very probably is trying to persuade somebody to do something. So teachers have to help students understand that. When students are working with primary sources, teachers should make certain they've identified two conflicting primary sources so they get that discussion going.

BIG IDEAS

KAPPAN: You've suggested that history teachers identify the big ideas that they want students to walk away with. That's not unusual. A lot of educators make the same recommendations about different subjects, like math, for example. If teachers focus more on teaching the themes of history, at some point students are going to stop knowing dates of important events. Is that a problem? When does that become a problem?

LOEWEN: I want students to know twigs. I'm not anti twigs, and dates are part of twigs. Certainly, students should know that the Civil War happened around 1860 and not in the 1960s. That's important. But we're not teaching the forest, or even the trees. Too often, we just teach the twigs.

Every American history teacher needs to identify 30 to 50 topics. If the Civil War isn't one of those topics, then it's an incompetent list.

KAPPAN: Is there any place where you've listed the 30 to 50 topics?

LOEWEN: Absolutely not! And you're not the first person to ask for that. Every teacher needs to make that decision for themselves. I will never do that. These have to be the 30 to 50 topics that the teacher thinks are so important, what he or she would never want students to graduate without learning.

KAPPAN: But you wouldn't have a problem with department of history teachers or maybe the American history teachers in a school district meeting together to collaborate on determining which topics should be taught.

LOEWEN: That's right. Each teacher should have some discretion, but too much discretion can be a problem. I've heard of one teacher in Boston who spends three months on the Boston Massacre. Well, those kids know about the Boston Massacre, but not much else.

HISTORICAL MARKERS

KAPPAN: You seem to have a special indignation for historical markers. You've found all kinds of errors in those markers and even written a book devoted to your discoveries. What is it about those markers that particularly bothers you?

LOEWEN: Well, this might be a reaction to my father. On every vacation, he stopped at every marker that we would pass. He thought it was good for us, and I guess it was. When I did research for

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Lies Across America (Touchstone, 1999), I found that many markers were examples of ethnocentric non-history or just plain wrong. I'm not talking about them being a year off in their dates. Many have much more deep-seated problems.

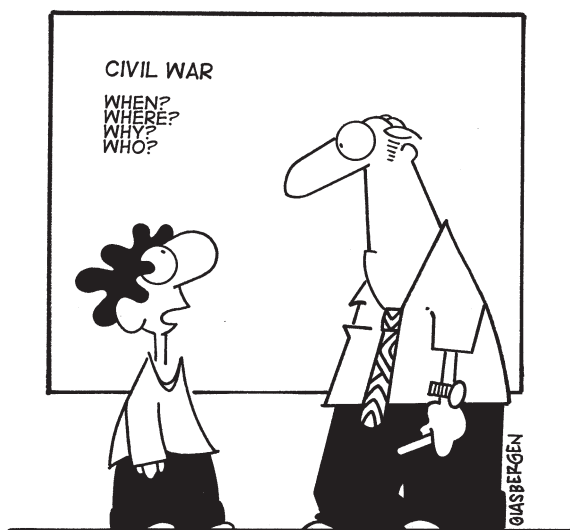
The very badness of the web is also part of its strength, because teachers can use it to teach students to become critical thinkers.

For example, there are three different historical markers in Indiana and one in Wisconsin that claim that's where the car was invented. Well, this is news to Mercedes-Benz!

Does it really help us to learn things that are just plainly not right? The marker movement got started in the 1920s and really peaked in the 1950s when gas companies encouraged people to drive more. Get out there and experience history on the road, that was the slogan. Most states didn't have any serious review mechanism. If somebody proposed a marker and had the ear of a state representative or an organization, and could raise the money to put it up, OK, they put it up!

Most states now have a much more professional review panel, and you have to convince them that what you're celebrating did happen. There's still a problem with the word "celebrating." We don't usually "celebrate" things that aren't so wonderful.

KAPPAN: In spite of your complaints, though, you suggest that studying historical markers can be a pretty good way to study history.



"Can I skip your classes if I promise to watch the History Channel when I grow up?"

LOEWEN: As soon as you start looking at historical markers or monuments or historical movies and novels seriously, you can get students to realize that every historical marker is a tale of two eras. It's a tale of what it's about, but it's also a tale of when it went up.

What can we learn, for example, from South Carolina's monument about Gettysburg? That went up about 1965. That may actually tell us more about 1965 than it does about 1863. As soon as students start asking questions like that, they're doing historiography. They're really studying history. Who wrote this? Who didn't write this marker? How would we write this differently today? What does this marker tell us about 1965 in South Carolina? They're learning twice as much about the past from any historic site than if they just took it for granted and just learned the date on the marker.

HISTORY & THE INTERNET

KAPPAN: How has the Internet changed the way that students approach history? Has having greater and easier access to information improved what students are learning about history?

LOEWEN: It's a wonderful tool, but I'm afraid it hasn't had the impact that it should, at least not yet. And that's because too many teachers just won't deviate from these huge, 1,152-page textbooks. When you're focused on getting through those 1,152 pages, you don't have time to teach students anything that comes from web or nonweb resources.

The web is a great opportunity. It's also true that there's a lot of misinformation on the web. But the very badness of the web is also part of its strength, because teachers can use it to teach students to become critical thinkers. For example, you cannot read what a KKK site says about Martin Luther King Jr. and what a more serious historical site says about King without seeing the difference. That's the kind of difference that encourages students to ask questions and learn more.

KAPPAN: My last question is really not so much about history but about forecasting a bit. When you look at this first part of the 21st century, what's going to get lost? What's going to be misinterpreted? Which voices are most likely to be overlooked or forgotten?

LOEWEN: That's such a good question. I'd suggest that teachers ask that of themselves and that teachers have students write about that as the last part of their American history course. At the end of the year, students' grades are in; everyone's taken the Advanced Placement test who is going to take it. So, now get students thinking about that very question as they move into the summer.

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